

# *The Mirror*



## the Mirror

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# Cathedral

by Charlotte Burgess

I was baptized Holy Roman Catholic, but I'm not anymore; holy that is, or roman, or catholic. My parents were not overly religious. I'm still not sure if either one of them believes in God. But they loved cathedrals; Italian, French, German, Dutch. Wherever our traveling took us, always the cathedrals... They loved them for their architecture, their craftsmanship, their art, and their age. I, in turn, loved them for their quietness, their heavy air, the sanctity of solitude found in their chapels, and their pools of placid water. The votive candles that I burned in every one gave such delicate wisps of smoke to the air, but set fire to my soul. In my youth I loved such a God who could inspire these magnificent offerings of stone and plaster. And I truly believed that he loved me.

Believing was a possession. In every fibre of my being I knew that God was with me. Like the electric shock of those sudden footsteps on cold marble floor, rippling outward to announce a presence even before they are there, I could feel God walking on my soul. It is to reach out, and almost touch, the adoring face of the Madonna. It is to have the trust of a child in a Grandpa, curled and cozy, smelling of leather and pipe tobacco, with earfuls of stories. It is the satiny wood of pews oiled smooth by generations of devoted hands clutching for support as they rise from the crimson velvet cushions where they have knelt in surrender to the soft click-clicking of their rosaries; the whispery sigh of Hail Mary's and Our Father's rising to the ceiling so far above their bowed heads. It is the scouring of conscience to an intricate grate of pungent wood behind deep purple curtains. It is catichism, and communion, prayer, and preaching, and it is blessing that I once thought I had. But I was never blessed, the blessed have faith of iron, bottomless pools of belief. If my faith were real, it would still be with me. It was but a shallow pond, a puddle, dried by the heat of one woman's fury.

*Charlotte Burgess*

Her footsteps were the first of her, loud and decisive. The few of us that sat that day to offer our thanks unto God felt the gauzy ties of our faith flutter before her countenance. The expression on her face was one of such unfathomable need, that, had she turned her gaze on me, perhaps my very soul would be gone today. She turned instead to rest her eyes upon the altar. Standing under the center dome, her face was played with multicolored light from the stained glass windows on either side of her. Her eyes followed the line of the altar, past it and up to the Rose Window at the very end of the knave, streaming with what I knew as holy light. Her knees gave at the sight, and there was not a whisper as she sank to the floor. Her face was clear; she did not cry. Only her need came pouring out of those depths, pooling at her feet, and spreading. Covering every symbol of her faith. It reached out to every corner, and the walls themselves trembled 'til they sang, it seemed, aching to satisfy her. And then, she took it all in.

She stripped the lustre off the golden icons, and cracked the pounded marble of the cosmotesque floor. She took the color from the stained glass windows, the water from the fonts, the plush from every cushion, the varnish from the pews. She took the sacred air, the oily candles, the frescoes, the vaulted and coffered ceiling, the gaping gargoyles, and the altar cloth. She stripped every tassel off every draping, took every footprint off the floor, she robbed souls of their graves, bishops of their scepters, priests of their robes. She wiped each page of the grand illuminated Bible, cleansing centuries of monastic duty away. And when she could find no more to take, we began to give. She expected no less. Our faith poured into hers, rushing over the walls, bringing out every steeped-in tradition and rite to add to her repertoire. We made a gift of our faith to her, kneeling before the altar, clutching at her soul,

## *Cathedral*

to do with as she would. The light from the window streamed in, enveloping her trembling frame, etching out every line in her face. She stood then, and reached out, as if to open a door, holding all that she had gathered in an outstretched hand, and we reached with her. In that moment, she begged God to believe in her. She sent a gaze to the heavens that no one could not answer, everything held still for that moment of reply; and held; and held. And then came back only silence. And with one decisive movement, she threw all she had gathered, back into the face of God.

I never knew who she was, or why she was there. I only know that today I do not believe. I cannot; my faith has preceded me to heaven.



# A Chestnut Runner

by Samantha Harvey

The greyhound bus was engorged with people, like a silver tick. It was fall, and the orange leaves let out little cries as the bus ran over their thinly veined bodies. I sat in the back, smoking a Camel, and my eyes pressed to the window and beyond, where the thin green strip of grass ran like an endless belt to the end of America. I stared at the flushed fall, like a pack of cards, jacks, queens, jesters. The huge white clapboard houses with green shutters were too gentrified, the black cats too sleepy on the clean, swept porches, the dark wood barns too sulky and perfect.

Instead of watching the corn husk doorways that were like The New Yorker and its tidy pictures, I ignored the scenic postcards and tried to examine the mountains beyond, through the green grey smoke of my chemical cigarette. I searched for young people hanging out in the yuppie towns, with the red leaf color tattooed on their healthy cheeks. I saw none. The towns were sterile and beautiful, the silver bus ran on and on.

When I was young, or maybe not such a long time ago, I ran barefoot into late November and my thick toes were numb from running the frozen ground. (The ground had a texture like brown stucco, my feet were strong and thick with skin). I created my own bizarre theater in the backyard, screened with blue-green pines, secret and sloping. Everyday I constructed jumps from broken branches, skewered into the ground, or sometimes I would drag out the kitchen chairs and put the broom between them. In my imagination I was a horse, one of several, each with its own wild spirit and special traits. The black horse was impossible and bold, ridden by only one girl. The white mare was classically mild and saintly, flowing through woods and trees. But it was the Chestnut horse that was the fastest, and when I assumed his identity I would fly through the woods like a wounded bird, hair streaming, eyes wet, mouth wide. I would run and jump so high and hard that I would fall, dead and breathless,

## *A Chestnut Runner*

sprawled on the ground, open against the sky, sides heaving (young ribs), blood rushing like drugs, (eyes thudding with delirium), lips wide in a red oval, (sucking in cold air like wine), legs quivering like the mock death of orange trees: I am the chestnut runner.

Journeys always make me sad, the ticking of tires on the road, overly plush seats (fat flesh) scenery flipping by like cheap carnival amusement. Seeing all these small towns, flooded with sunlight, the dogs and children are nowhere to be seen today but I can see the cracked pavement and empty swings, all flying by because I am in this bus running on and on. Past the soft suburbs and green lawns checkered with leaves, I search for the barefoot runner crashing through the woods all flung in fire, young and approaching death.

The bus moves with a metered hum of comfort. We pass a library with Greek revival columns, a bronze plaque next to it's door. I wonder what it says. Cleanly restored Victorian houses, faces blank and sweet like talc. So few people on this brilliant, with the very sky bleeding sunlight, a drunk wound. The bus is so warm and fast.

The green and yellow signs inform me that I am leaving Eden, and corn fields rush to the side of the road, and maples, and pumpkin patches. As we speed along in drug-like velocity I watch stone walls weave the woods. And I see a red dog, one of those settlers, running madly on the green field, towards the bus. His ears are back, he flies, he is only a red blotch on this green, he runs and I can feel the cold air flashing in my lungs, the fire in my legs. The bus is outrunning him, I look back at him, and I feel the sorrow bleed into me, as I finish my cigarette and stamp it out in the silver armrest next to me.

# To Those Brothers Who Die in the Storm

by Ceci Mendez

I

To those brothers who die in the storm;  
and to the fathers and mothers and sisters:  
when the children were silent and the winds still,  
frozen in time -- that was the night.

When mothers and fathers and sisters placed the syrup  
and sauce and chicken-lined dishes aside  
to venture (mother and sister hand in hand)  
toward the mahogany framed bay window;  
distorted -- cracked almost.  
To the one that did not belong,  
that was the night.

When the brothers flew off  
for an indeterminate number of hours  
(or days or weeks or years or milleniums or forever)  
on their Harley's or mountain bikes,  
that was night; as were those who had nothing.  
Not the tear in a pocket or the satisfaction of grief --  
at least in knowing you possess feeling;  
that you are alive and breathing and perhaps even thinking.  
Not the anger or the happiness but a dark hole of nothingness;  
a dark depth of indifference -- the root of all our wars.  
Not even the physical liberty of riding away  
for however long into the night.

II

And that was the night: the blue night.  
And in that blue night (not black, but blue)  
was the indifference before the storm visited;  
the indifference the storm cherished.

*To Those Brothers Who Die in the Storm*

No name, just the whipping and lashing and crashing  
of crosswind against crosswind against the large bay window  
where mothers and fathers and sisters stood.  
And brothers were swallowed up by the nameless winds:  
Wind licking red and yellow maples outside; bitter wind.  
More than bitter -- sharp, but more than sharp:  
Stabbing was the wind.

With needles flying, burrowing at the tiniest, most helpless,  
pathetic root of grass buried deep within the depths of our front yard  
which may well have been the roots of our minds --  
of father's mind and mother's mind and sister's mind, too --  
the needles piercing our inner ears, our eardrums,  
our senselessness.

III

Complacency stirred to the top of father's eyes,  
spilling incessantly over the rims of his bottom lids  
onto the knotted pinewood floor;  
an unbroken waterfall releasing all sorrow and happiness  
and forgiveness for mother to cleanse.  
Father peered through the bay as mother,  
on hands and knees,  
soaked up his rain.

Staring out at the paper box gone --  
not from this storm, but from the blizzard  
some three years back.  
That ice-blue blizzard, you remember.  
And now we were here,  
three years caught in rope and hail:  
three years and three brothers  
gone by by the storm.





## Kezia's Maggots

by Kinn-Ming Chan

Kezia's hair hung covering her face, like flaps of bark streaked of honey. Her skin was white and soft like fine beach washed by years of undulating ocean waves. Sometimes, when she was reading or working at her desk, the back of her neck would resemble the perfect ski slope curving ever so slightly at the nape. Her whole being was fluid; she moved like a river of newly melted chocolate. Gliding past reflective surfaces, she imagined herself on the other side, the way Alice did.

Sitting on the curb, facing away from the school, Alice and Kezia watched as the big yellow school buses inhaled children and then pulled away ponderously. Sitting there, with sand and salt eating at the granular ice, Kezia let her mouth slide toward her ears. Sitting under the thirsty sun whose rays licked the crunching white snow, they let their conversation drift away from the school, down the driveway, past the riverbank, and down the river. Crawling softly like maggots in an upturned trash can lid, climbing over old questions like the maggots crawling over each other in an attempt to escape the lid which would metamorphasize into a saucepan when the soft morning sun became relentless flooding brightness, their voices explored the wind and blended together, making sense out of sounds.

They sat there on the curb for a long time after all the buses had abandoned the place.

Alice took her right forefinger and gently rubbed and probed Kezia's nylon-clad thigh. Her fingernail traced swollen wormy tracks that ended six inches below Kezia's hemline. Her mouth contracted and dilated, to display egg white teeth, and then Kezia would massage her wormy flesh.

Kez looked at Alice's eyes and tried to imagine herself on the other side. She always did that when she looked at reflective surfaces, because

*Kezia's Maggots*

Alice had once mentioned doing that. It never worked though, not even when she was staring at a small, thin, sharp-edged piece of aluminum. Sitting on the bald white toilet, alone in the bathroom, she couldn't even do it, so she would create a family of worms with a shiny piece of aluminium. Alice had once mentioned doing that.

As their voices tried to escape, the sun crept up high and then began rolling down again. The maggots in the lid by the roadside were probably fried dead.

Al looked at the eyes looking at hers, and she knew about the bald toilet, just the way she knew about the other side. Her cat had once mentioned having worms. The cat had said that cats got sick because of them; but people were the other way around.

## In A Few Years

by Doug Kern

Picture a small Catholic school in the Midwest, a few years ago. It has a marble statue of the Virgin Mary with her child in the front, and an austere church adjoining the school. Picture the grassy playground behind this school. It has plenty of jungle-gym toys, swings, and long playing fields, where tomorrow's battles will be won. It is fall, and the piles of dead leaves invite the children to break the teachers' rules and frolic among their corpses. Picture this playground filled with small children. The boys are clad in blue pants and button-down blue shirts. The girls are wearing long, ugly, green-plaid dresses, or white blouses with ugly green-plaid skirts. They are playing, laughing, joking, giggling, screaming, and celebrating their innocence. The children are your basic Midwestern Catholic waifs -- Caucasian, European, and essentially interchangeable. Some appear different, some are smarter, some dumber, some richer and some poorer -- it does not matter. In a few years, they will interbreed and become their parents.

All except one. One little child, smaller than the others, wanders about the playground like a lost soul. He is new at this school, and different. He is a year younger than the other children, and made painfully aware of this in every gym class, in every game played before school, in every taunt and jeer he endures for his size and weakness.

Yet the boy is different. He excels at those useless activities with which adults torture children to prevent them from being too happy. He has no trouble with those confusing numbers and letters, does not suffer in agony when the teacher calls upon him, does well on the tests that the others fail. He does not try to assert himself; he does not try to rebel against the system -- he seems to enjoy it.

And worse than this is the fact that the boy is shy. He fears all children he does not know. He avoids confrontation and dislikes speaking out of class. He loathes teachers who force him upon the others; he holds his privacy sacred; he lives in deathly fear of friendly clowns and Santa Claus.

The boy would seem to be easy prey for the more malicious aspects of the children's innocence -- the innocence of hurtfulness and sorrow -- but he is not. He has learned how to avoid the bigger children, how to be inconspicuous, how to run. He knows how to be the teacher's pet and has to come to accept the low-level jeering that follow him like iron filings to a magnet.

The boy wanders about the playground, watching the children dance and giggle in their fleeting Eden. They are content but not happy, for they have known this sublime happiness all their lives and can imagine nothing different.

A friendly housewife rings a bell. The children pry themselves from their games and grudgingly walk to the front of the school. Two rough lines are formed in front of the main door; one for boys, one for girls. Many drivers will pass by the crude, squirming line of rowdy children in blue and ugly green-plaid, and remember.

From out of the main door comes a nun. This nun has forsaken her habit in favor of a simple blue dress and a no-nonsense white blouse. Sister Mary Agatha looks the same way she looked when she began teaching, uncountable years earlier. Her hair has always been dark, short, and curly, her eyes have always been bright blue, her face always slightly wrinkled, her voice always loud and whiny. Sister Mary has taught for almost all her life and neither age nor infirmity will restrain her; if you ask her, she will tell you that she will die teaching. In a few years, when she collapses in the school office of a fatal heart attack, it will be said that the last sound she made was a sigh of relief.

Sister Mary Agatha is a hard woman; she has seen much adversity in her life. She goes through life with a scowl, for she would not command the respect that she does were she to show her tremendous love. Sister Mary Agatha is a muscular Christian; slow to change, quick to punish, but quicker to forgive. She knows that the Lord has given her the task of taming these children, and she does this with cold efficiency.

The nun screams an admonition at the children, and they fall silent. As the children settle down, Sister Mary Agatha begins counting heads. Eight, nine, one, two... only fifty two? Someone is missing. She counts again, but the number is the same. She calls out to the children, asking them who is missing. They mill about like sheep, looking around half-heartedly.

Sister Mary Agatha sighs. She is about to ask everyone to line up according to their homeroom seats when she spies from the corner of her eye the missing child.

A lone figure is making her way down the street. She is moving slowly and quietly; a pink and green-plaid blob in the distance. The children notice her, too, and stare at the strange, homely creature that is making her way to the school.

The creature is a little girl, slowly returning to the school after eating lunch at home, two blocks away. She is an ugly little girl, with long, stringy, brown hair whose only sign of grooming is two garish barettes on both sides of her head. Her forehead and her nose are too big and her face is long and ovular. Her skin is a pallid white and she walks with a pronounced slouch. She does not truly walk but merely ambles, as if lost in a fog. She is mumbling to herself, and her eyes are fixated upon the ground. The child has not yet lost her baby fat, but her entire demeanor creates the illusion that she is grossly overweight.



The child is wearing a dirty jacket that was once a bright, day-glo pink but had long since lost its luster. The jacket was a hand-me-down long before this child was born, and it is worn loosely over the ugly green-plaid dress. The child is wearing old black patent-leather shoes that have never been shined and are a half-size too small. Her white stockings have runs in them; her watch is cheap plastic. The girl clings to a backpack that is ludicrously out of place. It is the latest in trendy designer backpacks, all the rage with the other children. It is surely a gift from a distant relative, and the girl clings to it as if it were a magic talisman.

As the creature draws closer, Sister Mary Agatha realizes, to no surprise, that she is merely Marsha Cutshaw, making her way back from her home. Sister Mary Agatha shakes her head with disgust. The Cutshaws are a huge family that have been sending their children to the school for years. They are a brood of no-accounts, troublemakers, and tramps. Even the parents are scum: the father is a hard-drinking Naval sailor, the mother a soap opera addicted baby machine. At least this one doesn't cause trouble like the others.

The other children recognize her, and bristle with contempt. Marsha is ignored by boys and teased by the girls, for Marsha has the cooties. Her ugly clothes, her slouch, the way she forgets to do her homework, the way she cheats so blatantly on tests -- all these are breeding grounds for cooties. Marsha Cutshaw, sometimes useful as a source for cruel amusement, nothing more. The teachers would lecture them about being nice to Marsha, and perhaps a guilty few would throw her a few conciliatory bones of friendship, but nothing more. Marsha is forgotten by all on Valentine's Day, the last in line to do anything or go anywhere, and completely useless at sports. In a few years, the others will call Marsha "weird," "neurotic," a "nonentity" and "not our kind;" they will say that "she doesn't have both oars in the water," that "she doesn't try to do anything," that "she lives in a world all her own." The children will use many words, but they all mean the same thing: Marsha has the cooties.

The nun screams out to the child. Marsha Cutshaw! Why are you so late? You know you should be here before now! You are keeping everybody waiting! Hurry up!

The pink and green-plaid figure moves from a slow trudge to a fast plod, mumbling to herself with greater vigor. The children stare on, wondering whether to laugh or mourn.

A child at the front of the line will make the decision for them. She is a pretty little blonde haired girl with a voice that could split wood. She has already learned how to manipulate her father; in a few years she will attempt to fornicate with every male in her high school and come close to succeeding.

The girl, deciding that a humorous coda is needed to Sister Mary Agatha's comment, yells out, "Yeah, Marsha!"

The comment is not funny, but the children are looking for an excuse to laugh, for laughter is easier than compassion. A few giggles erupt here and there, and the class cut-up screams it, too. Yeah, Marsha! Now almost the entire class is snickering. Even the loving Sister Mary Agatha chortles a bit.

Meanwhile, the little boy is watching all this. Deep down inside him, there is a little voice telling him that this is wrong, that the chubby little girl plodding down the street might be him, that he should stand up against all this. The little boy listens to it for just a brief moment, but the virus of the group mentality strikes him, and his more animalistic desires take hold of his mind. He begins to murmur "Yeah, Marsha," quietly, like a mantra. Then he says it louder, giggling at the humor of it all. Then he starts to speak it, loudly. The people around him hear the little boy talk, and that makes them laugh harder. Now the boy is screaming it with malicious vigor! Just about everyone in line is cracking up!

The boy is amazed. They are laughing with him! Not at him, as is so often the case, but with him! At a joke he made! It is a heady feeling, enough to make him forget about that annoying little voice in the back of his mind.

The laughter subsides, and the lines begin to amble into the school. Marsha finally makes her way to the front door, where Sister Mary Agatha clasps her ear, and exerts her superhuman nun strength to drag the child into the office. When Marsha is next seen, her face will be more pale than usual. The little children make their way up the stone stairs to their homeroom, as so many generations of children before them have done. The boys are still giggling about that tremendous joke. One boy starts to talk with that strange, quiet little kid who wanders around the playground so much. He seems like an okay fellow. The two chat for a bit. That afternoon, they will sit together on the bus. The next day, the quiet little boy will be introduced to the other boy's friends. By the end of the year, he will be an accepted member of the clique.

In years to come, that little boy will draw strength from that group of friends, for they are much like him; shy, smart children who have drawn together for their mutual protection. He will overcome his fears, and will one day break free from the modern caste system that caused him so much misery. One day, he will sit down at his word processor and remember that day when he laughed at the little pink and green-plaid blob ambling down the street. He will wonder about what he did, about what would have happened had it been he who was late coming back from lunch, about the little voice he chose to ignore. But most of all, he will wonder what happened to that child, in a few years.

## Blur

## Of Growing Up

by Chris Schulten

My arms extended, tanned  
                                Distance taught me to look  
My motion is learned long ago  
                                although I hate to turn my head  
from ages of doing the same  
                                and see how far I have to go  
under a late July sun  
                                New Haven was left behind  
and the polished water  
                                in a flurry of wings  
green with silt and dust  
                                I imagine that I have been split by a slender bow  
old and tired of flying away  
                                parted, ripped, but not with violence  
from the burnt city of decay  
                                at the boats passage  
which calls to you and  
                                the water is reunited  
I know I will return  
                                behind the stern, there is a trial  
because you never left Time  
                                of two wedding ribbons  
flying away on whose currents  
                                pointing to the concave shore  
you cannot glide my wings  
                                silver and gold and hot  
are too fragile for you.





## Life Line

by Nicole Filosi

I was the only one working for him. My father. In an auto parts store. I was the only girl. Of course I was the one that had to clean the bathroom at the end of the week.

I figured that soon enough I would have earned so much money, and had enough school, so that I would be the one telling him to clean up his own stinken' john. I hated the way the guys I worked with treated me so much like a "girl." All the paper pushing, all the filing. You know I just think that they couldn't read. Just dumb city kids.

Lincoln, he still works for him. Well he kicked me out of the bathroom right as I was about to take on the task of cleaning the vile, disgusting porcelain bowl they use to dispose of their wastes, warm sodas, and cigarette butts. Lincoln was in there for twenty-eight minutes. I knew he wasn't fixing his hair. He had gone bald already. I figured he was reading some of those dirty magazines. The guys at the store thought I was some stupid little girl.

As I went back into the bathroom I forgot all about cleaning the can and started looking for the "evidence." I wanted to know that I was right. I wanted to show those guys how smart I was.

There it was. On the top shelf, a clipboard peeking over the edge. I carefully took it down, triumphant of my find. To my disappointment, there was no magazine. To my horror, there were five lines of coke and a cut-off straw from McDonalds. You know, the kind with the red and yellow stripes.

I put that board back without breathing. I guess he wasn't reading magazines. I guess I was wrong.

I quickly went back to scrubbing.

Phil, my father, went to the bathroom next. I went back in to clean the sink. Two lines disappeared.

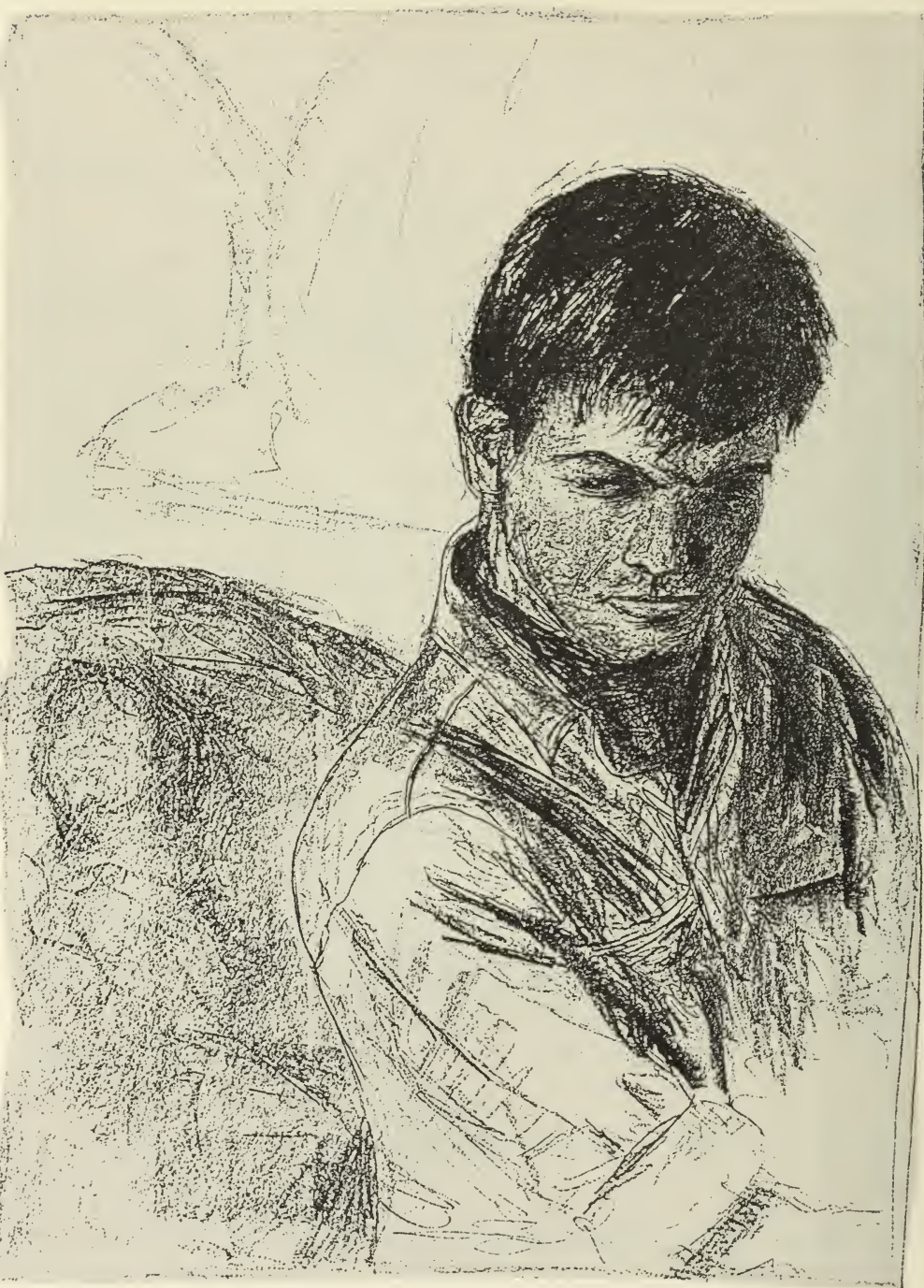
My dad: We used to go fishing, we used to play football together. We used to... You know I don't think I have ever seen a cleaner bathroom.

The bathroom was done. I had to wait for him for my ride home. All

the guys I worked with were in the office. Alone with belts, plugs and batteries. I wanted to go home.

The door to the office opened. They were all laughing. They were going to treat me to a ride home on a motorcycle for the clean bathroom.

Cruising in and out of traffic on 93 at ninety-five miles an hour. I had to hold on to him. He was my life line. Water pouring from my eyes because of the oncoming winds. You see I wasn't crying. Girls don't always cry.



## More Red Than You Remember

by Alex Radocchia

The wind catches in your sails, not enough, tack left, strain against gravity, pulling you back, your bone and muscle crying out to give in, to return. Instead strain up, but there is no up, drive your bow into the storm, grasp the wind, absolute or nothing. Don't look over your shoulder, the sun, so close and gaining steady, even as you struggle. Your own fault for trying to catch the wind. Hold tight to the wind, knuckles white, coarse splinters driving into your palm, your fingertips. Dare yourself to let go, dare to burn. Blood on your tongue, in your throat. Your own blood. Somewhere you bleed, but you have no time to bleed, no strength to bleed. Muscle and bone scrape together, but no feeling, only movement. Six hours, running. Running from the sun. Alone, except for the wind. Rule number one is never trust the wind.

The heat builds. Sweat mixes with blood, you try not to gag. The wind twists and you scream from the pressure, pulling your body in. No sound. The cabin is black from the white-blue light driving through it, and it's shimmering, trying to disintegrate. It's tearing itself apart, but your eyes are glazing and maybe it's just you. Now at least you don't have to watch your own destruction arrive, you start to fade too. You can feel the loss of solidity, growing in your imagination, creeping to your brain and through your limbs, whispering that you can cease to exist. No more pain. Then a voice in your head, a voice you never knew existed, chanting, strange words strange sounds, a voice of steel commanding your attention, peeling your fingers from the wood, drawing your hands to your head. Concentrate, hold your skull together. The words echo, from one side of your skull to the other, louder. Louder, you never knew there was so much space to echo in, and then you realize the words aren't just in your head, and you open your eyes, and you see rocks, covered in blue algae, and your ship is lying on its side, the mast snapped and the sail in tatters, reminding you of the photographs of ancient maritime in your academy



*More Red Than You Remember*

textbooks. And the sky is pink with haze, and in the sky the sun hangs, more red than you remember, and you hear the words from your head still echoing, quietly, slowly across the sky. And you lie on your back in the sand and silently swear to yourself to never ride the solar winds again.



## this side of the wall

by Alex Radocchia

Nov. 28

Dear Anna,

The trees are turning. I can see them burn orange and yellow, almost painful to my eyes, too accustomed to the white starkness of my room. I'm not supposed to see them, but if I climb up on the edge of my bed and leap for the window, I can grab the sill before hitting the wall, and hold onto the bars with my knees, and if no one hears my thrashings and comes running to my cell to peel me off the wall and sedate me into oblivion, I can just see the tops of elm trees in the distance, past the concrete wall. They're beginning to think I really am crazy, and I feel no need to change their opinion of me.

Nov. 31

Dear Anna,

I'm adjusting nicely to being insane. This morning I gave one of the older ones quite a scare. I like to think he might be pleased if he'd known I'd staged a fit solely for his benefit, but he probably wouldn't. I was feeling creative, I figured I'd test this going insane stuff. When he unbolted the door, all unsuspecting and innocent of terror, I jumped him. And happily, I admit. He froze looking up at me, me with my arms spread and flying off the bed at him like a demon. And I would have torn into his neck, given another heartbeat. But of course I never made it. One of the guards caught me by the arm and wrenched my shoulder out of its socket. The other shoved me to the floor and proceeded to sit on me, in the spilled poison, free and seeping across the floor of my cell, the poison that was meant for my brain. The old man didn't want to stay, but they made him, and I could almost taste his new-found terror when he shot me full of darkness. That was a while ago. I lose track so easily when it's dark. My left shoulder is gone -- I can't feel a thing, and I suppose they think they'll teach me to behave, but it was worth seeing the old man's face, like a mouse's, its quivering body waiting to be snapped in two by an owl's piercing claws.

*(continued)*

*this side of the wall*

Nov. 34

Dear Anna,

I saw the sun again today. And the trees. It's been so long. They finally sent a doctor, and he reattached my shoulder. And they let me see the sun. He asked me why I attacked the old man, but I don't think he really wanted to know, so I didn't tell him. He wouldn't have understood if I'd told him that pain takes me closer than anything else to escaping this place. He stayed for a long time, and took notes, but I couldn't see them. I was tied to the bed, for my own good, and after he left I tried to get through the straps, and unbolt the bed from the floor, but I couldn't reach even that far. I keep hoping that somehow in the pain and the dark I will find myself, will somehow find my way into the part of my brain they have closed to me, that I'll be able to move free of my body again, but the pills and the poison never stop, and I can't reach the part of my mind that counts. They don't care what I do with my body. I can see the door in my head, leading to the rest of my mind, but there's a wall in front of it as tall as the one that surrounds this place. And I'm as helpless to overcome one as the other.

Nov. 38

Dear Anna,

I've been hooked up for the last three days straight. They didn't even give me time to heal, just came in the middle of the night and dragged me out, and ran current through me for three days. All the time, all I could hear was the thrumming of machinery, and my own screams. I think I'm going blind -- I still can't see well. But I feel stronger. The pain that runs through my body burrows into my mind, cracking the delicate structures of my brain, but if I can hold the pain there, maybe I can crack the wall as well. Then I'd be free. It's a delicate game of chance between breaking the wall and breaking my mind. If They'd only bother to kill me, this would be much easier -- They'd be rid of the menace of me, and maybe I could get back inside my head again. But They're much too stubborn for that -- They'd much rather prove to themselves that I am human and torturable, that nothing exists which They can not destroy. They need to prove that I am blinding and dissectable, like every other idiot. Except that I'm much more interesting than the average idiot: I have doors in my head.

*(continued)*



Nov. 41

Dear Anna,

I tried talking to the floor bolts yesterday. I thought maybe if I could explain to them just how alone I was, they might take pity on me, and talk to me. But they ignored me, being far too busy, holding the floor down, and me in, and after a while I got mad and ignored them back. But I heard them whispering to each other when they thought I was asleep, and I knew they were loosening themselves from the floor. The floor buckled, and peeled itself back to where the sky should have been but wasn't, and I looked past my cell, past the floor, to the outside where I was once free, and I couldn't see anything. And the bolts were singing, but their song got lost in the dark. I knew they were singing about secret things, taunting me with their lost songs, and if I could only hear them, I could escape and fly free. Really fly, not just almost. But I couldn't hear, and my head hurt, and I started to yell at the bolts because they wouldn't listen to me. Then They heard me. And the bolts and the floor jumped back, to the way everyone knows bolts and floors are supposed to be. And They came, but They wouldn't believe me that the bolts had been singing. One of Them held my arms behind my back, and I tried to kick the other one, but he hit me first. I woke up in the dark, on a bed that wasn't mine, and the current came, and it ran through my ears and down my spine, and into my skull where it got caught, and where it stayed. This time I couldn't even scream. The wall was shaking, but I couldn't pull it down. I tried so hard, dug into it with all my strength, but I couldn't stand the pain, and I had to let go.

Nov. 43

Dear Anna,

They made me sleep for two days -- Their drugged sleep, that comes with the poison and the pain. To keep me quiet, to keep me from screaming, They said. I couldn't hear myself scream. The pain is still here, imbedded in my skull. I see it, eating through my mind. It's creeping slowly towards the wall, and the door is shuddering, but not for me. For Them. The wall is crumbling, but it won't do me any good. They have full possession of my mind. But my light is special-clear, strong and more dangerous than they know. When They finally break down the wall They will release the danger. It is sleeping now, quieted with all the poison. But when They wake it, the light will lash out at Them, the way it has so many times before. But this time I won't control it. It will burn Them all. It will destroy me, and They will prove

*this side of the wall*

their control over me, but They will be destroyed as well. Maybe I can finally be dead. But maybe not. Maybe They know what they are doing, and there will be no escape. It is so hard to think clearly.

Nov. 44

Dear Anna,

I can't feel my legs today -- the feeling went away during the night. At first I tried to stand up, but I kept couldn't balance, and fell. I tried to catch myself but the bed got in the way, I hit it with my shoulder, and couldn't stop myself, and tumbled off the bed to the floor, and lay there where I landed, with my head under the bed. It was comfortable there, no place else to fall to. I closed my eyes and lost



## Kenny

by Ceci Mendez

He once told me that he hated smoking, that he had never smoked in his whole life, and that he was completely against smoking. "I believe in salad. With lots of tomatoes," Kenny had said. "Except for Sundays. Then I eat pizza or Chinese. Everyone's entitled to one of those days -- at least once a week, anyway." Kenny has some really weird ideas about food that I never could understand. He's very particular in his tastes which, strangely enough, change every once in a while. Last Tuesday he told me he decided he was going to be addicted to coffee. For some reason, though, he refuses to drink it with cream or sugar. "It absolutely has to be black," he often says. "An addiction to coffee is super, I think, but as soon as you add the cream and all that other crap, it goes sour. So then where's the beauty in it?" Like I said, I just don't get it. And I certainly had no answers for him, not that he expected any from me. Maybe it's because I don't drink coffee anyway and I wouldn't understand such things. I've heard that a lot lately. That I'm too young to understand, that I'll understand things when I'm older. It's quite frustrating to always be wondering how old older actually is. All I know is that it just never seems to get here.

I was listening to the radio this morning and I heard the word "stranger." I don't know why the word stayed with me; after all, it's a pretty normal word. And I thought of Kenny and how much he liked to run and eat salad with lots of tomatoes. And how I barely knew him, let alone understood him, yet I knew so much about him. The first time I met him we were listening to WCKO and the host called the caller a hick. The hick was a wimp, I know, because he said, "Yes, it must be so." Kenny said he thought that was funny. I wondered why he thought it was funny and when I finally asked him he just said that that's the way it was. I said okay and changed the dial.

I hate tomatoes and salad is okay. I like cheese. I like cheese on salad.

And cheese on potatoes. And on wheat bread. Actually, I don't like wheat bread at all alone, only when there's cheese on it and then only when the cheese is melted. We -- my family and I -- never really eat salads with our dinners like a lot of people I know. I suppose that because Mom, who usually does all of the cooking unless she's out of town in Boston doing a craftshow or something, never makes salads for us. I guess salad is a traditional thing, and Mom isn't really all that traditional. Not that she tries to be untraditional, whatever that means; that's just the way she is. Making salad is not the only thing Mom doesn't do. (Actually, she never does that much in the kitchen -- the thought of cooking amuses her and scares her at the same time, even though I know for a fact that she'd never admit to being scared of the kitchen.) This year, my brother and I decided that we hated turkey, so when we asked Mom to make us meatloaf with cheese for Thanksgiving dinner, she wasn't surprised, she didn't laugh, she didn't ask questions like why we didn't want a turkey, or a chicken, even. She did ask us, though, if we wanted the meatloaf made with ketchup or barbecue sauce. So Mom made the meatloaf and I got to poke holes in the potatoes before putting them in the microwave. We didn't have salad, as usual, but I thought of Kenny, as usual.

I don't think Kenny is happy. I guess he's upset that it takes so much to please his wife. Kenny says he makes his own salads because he doesn't like it when his wife (her name is Sandra) does it. "Sandra doesn't put in enough tomatoes and even if I ask her to she won't. But I have no idea why," Kenny would mumble frequently, half to me, half to himself. "Me neither," I would tell him. I wondered if I would ever know. I wondered if I would ever figure out anything before Kenny did. But their arguments over salad aren't why she isn't all that happy, I don't think; neither does Kenny. Kenny says that Sandra's

## *Kenny*

only happy when he buys her expensive presents. So one time he bought her a nearly flawless turquoise necklace and flowers (I think he said they were roses) for her birthday and after she finished opening her present she asked where the hell the card was -- you would have thought she was expecting diamonds or something.

Kenny said he sort of expected it. He said Sandra does things like that all the time. He doesn't know why he's still married to her. He says he thinks he is because he loves her. They got married too young. I think I'm going to get married someday. I think. But I don't want to be like Sandra. And I don't want to be married to someone like Kenny. I mean, I like Kenny and everything. He really do. Maybe it's because he's so much older and I don't understand people that old yet -- that's why I wouldn't marry someone like him, I mean. Maybe that's a terrible thing to say, but, like I said, grown-ups tell me all the time that I'm too young to understand and after a while I just start believing them. What else can I do, right? And why would they ever understand me? Maybe I won't ever get married.

But Mom and Dad are happy most of the time, I think. So maybe I will. What if I married Jeff, Kenny's younger brother? Then I guess I would sort of be related to Sandra. No, I can't do that. Whatever. I think it's best I wait a few years before I think about this anyway. Kenny said he should have gotten a card for Sandra from his sister-in-law. She owns a Hallmark shop and he could have gotten a card there for his wife for free. Not that Kenny needs to save money, though. I mean, he's not a millionaire or anything but he's real comfortable. He can afford to buy grapes when they're \$3.69 a pound, Sandra has a private hairdresser named Jaque, and he has a state-of-the-art video cassette recorder on which he tapes every episode of Fantasy Island. He had

every show, except now he has all of them except two since Eric, his seven-year-old son, spilled his warm milk all over one of the tapes on the family room table. The rug is still stained, too. Kenny says they won't get a new rug. Even if they wanted to they could, but they didn't want to bother. It would wear away in time, just like the grape juice stain that Kenny made several months ago, before he discovered his addiction to coffee (black, of course). It had been a bad stain, worse than the milk one, but it was barely noticeable now.

"Who could ask for more?" Kenny asked me once, speaking of his VCR. But I know Kenny wants more than he has; spiritually, anyhow. He says he's Catholic, sort of, and he believes that there is a God of some sort, but he never goes to church except on Christmas and Easter; occasionally he'll make it for Thanksgiving mass. When I asked him why he only goes on those days, he said he doesn't know -- that he just feels like he should. He wants more, he says, but he's too lazy to make the effort. That's how he'd put it, anyhow. Somehow, for some reason, I think he deserves a little more credit than he's giving himself. I told him so, even though I don't know why I thought that. For once, Kenny didn't know either.

Kenny says he wishes his wife was more like my father. Dad is happy when I make him a card and buy him vanilla ice cream at the Baskin Robbins in the Hampshire Mall for his birthday. It's the only kind of ice cream he likes, but sometimes he eats butter crunch when there's no vanilla. If Sandra, on the other hand, doesn't get what she wants, when she wants it, she gets all hostile and Kenny doesn't like it much. Who would? Sometimes Kenny jokes that Eric is more mature than Sandra. Then he always feels bad that he said something like that, even if it's true in some ways. I can't wait until I'm old enough to

## *Kenny*

drive my dad to the mall for his birthday. When I ask him what he wants (for his birthday) he just says that he wants a kiss and a hug. I think a lot of fathers say that if they're happy, especially if their kids are little. Kenny's a simple guy, like my father. My friend Ronna doesn't have a father, sort of. She tells people that he died when she was three years old, but the truth is, that she's never met him; and no one really knows if he's dead or not. But she doesn't want people to know that. She does have a mother, though, and five brothers and two sisters. She and her mother and brothers and sisters moved to California two years ago, right before an earthquake hit, to live with her Aunt Jackie. Ronna's older brother would always talk about how the earthquake was his best near death experience yet. Ronna's mother, who hated to hear him talk like that, kept wishing they hadn't moved to California, but they never moved back to Massachusetts. Her real name is Rosana - Ronna's, I mean. Kenny said that he liked the name Rosana better than Ronna. He said he hoped that, when she got older, people would call her Rosana, even though Kenny's real name isn't Kenny. It's Douglas.





## Milo Clogan's Barn

by Ceci Mendez

You said you would return one day  
(maybe on a Friday or Saturday years and years ago)  
to Milo Clogan's rooster barn  
by the road named River;

and when finally you came you  
had just lost Emory to Salt Lake City  
and vegetarianism  
and you know how she said that  
the barn  
and riding that tractor--chipped down to rust  
from brown, from yellow--that you loved  
just wasn't enough;  
all she wanted was Interstate  
91 but all you could give were backroads through Orange  
to Clogan's farm.

So now its roosters and you  
because Milo's been gone seven  
years, maybe eight by now  
since he had no children and his wife died with  
the rest of her mules.

The tangled hill rides deep into you.  
In Swite's Swamp where you and Kevin and  
Scott and sometimes Emory would ride  
in winter  
and when you sailed on top of each other,  
woven like the grass in summer,  
except now on crystals packed hard  
with rain, you all tried  
not to smash into the wall of ice that wanted  
so badly to meet you, slice or slash,  
face to face.

Ceci Mendez

And you know what Emory was trying to say  
was actually a warning of  
the mad roosters--  
that's why she left, you think,  
as you climb to the crown of the home-grown hill  
and peer over and see the ice since '71  
and you decide that now you will fall,  
dive down; and you don't think--all you do is do  
and milleniums and a few seconds later you are on the ice, cut  
and stained and before you is Emory,  
locked and suctioned to the freeze  
and smeared by your blood  
as you cry  
*Emory, Emory, don't you still need this barn?*

# Tadpole

by Ida Hsu

I squatted there for an eternity, with my pink feet planted smack into the concrete, my pudgy fingers wrapped around the links of the rusting fence behind me with a grip that would squeeze the life out of any Barbie, and my pint-sized chest heaving as if I had just almost drowned. Of course, I hadn't even come close to drowning. It was merely the vision of myself wafting gently down like a puff of cattail in the autumn breeze, sinking slowly to the bottom of a pool under the big people's feet, that would set my heart into awkward syncopation.

The venturesome weeds and prickly brush poked their way through the fence into the pool's domain. Shanta let me crouch there, as I contemplated my futile desires to be on the other side. If the weeds wanted to join the "Tadpoles," they could take my place in the wading pool. They might even advance to the "Frog" group if they knew how to kick and splash hard enough. The "Turtles" got to take the kickboards out into the deeper swimming lanes where Shanta's older sister would stand and guide them, and the few and privileged "Minnows" actually learned to doggy paddle and breaststroke on their own. Those kickboards were so appealing -- they were blue, chipped, had faded dolphins painted on one side, and always gave a flailing swimmer confidence and power. However, the kickboards were reserved for those flailing swimmers, and not for earth-clingers like me.

After I stopped panting, I lifted my gaze from the beetle underfoot, to see Shanta finally coming to retrieve me. Her navy blue swimsuit had white stripes running down either side, giving her the aura of an Olympic champion. Mommy told me that she had swum one hundred and twelve laps at the Codman pool swim-a-thon. She raised more than two hundred dollars for the swim team, and didn't I wish I could be amazing like that someday? In response to that suggestion, I would usually shriek, "Naw! I don't wanna swim!

And you can't make me! Naw!"

This hydrophobic attitude of mine distressed not only my mother, but Shanta, Mrs. McCarthy, and all the other teachers at Green Acres. Every day, they would attempt to coax me nearer and nearer to the shimmering water, either by carrying me straight to the water's edge, or by hoping that I would venture a few more mouse steps on my own, towards the pool. And every day, I would realize that the body of sparkling turquoise before my pink, stubby toes was larger than me. This daily realization would send me running for dry grass and crying in anguish. I struggled as if Dr. Frankenstein were coming after me with a glisteningly sharp hypodermic needle.

But for now, Shanta peeled me from my eternal crouch, all chubby like a Cabbage Patch doll, just to lift me into her arms, tear-streaked and pouty. I welcomed her hold, and watched the drops of rain from her hair splatter onto my own bathing suit, bleeding over the furry pink with a darker red, and redefining the violet letters in a shade closer to black. "Promise you'll try someday," she whispered, "and I'll give you a gummy bear!"



## Fair

by Sonya Chung

You let your eyes roll over historical  
Vegetable huts as they flash by  
And that is Topsfield.  
You tell  
Mister to stop but he doesn't believe in history.  
Tall treetops fail in blockading the impatient  
Morning sun;  
You remember the crumpled bills of this morning's  
Worried mother cramped into  
A small, suffocating change purse in the inside pocket  
Of your Windbreaker.  
An old town, a new visionary.

When the past stops you pay the man and with  
Hopes like wild flames you know  
You are free.  
You do not expect to hear that  
Cheap carnival music but its tangling  
Melody is a warning to the proud: There will be no  
Uptown nonsense in this small town.  
You cross over briskly  
Beyond the gates of posterity into a density of  
Farm and fair and you have entered the  
Maze of generations.  
Suddenly, 1791 overwhelms you;  
You realize that  
Amusement was invented long before you were.

(continued)

*Sonya Chung*

Try your luck and win a prize; try again,  
and your prize gets getter.  
To believe in the simplicity is to survive.  
A whirl of bright lights brings you back  
To your senses;  
The man with the greasy  
Sausage brushes against your shoulder, yet  
He is a World away; You are  
Intimate with Angora rabbits  
and wire cages  
And you help Sheriff Charles Reardon arrest  
Leukemia for a dollar.

You know you are a sucker  
For freedom.



## The Taos Pueblos

by Anne Kellogg

The red adobe pueblos lay hidden in the folds of the New Mexican Rockies like a jewel, a keyhole to civilization, as timeless as the desert encompassing it. Children squander bits of the new; modern culture seeps through their veins, poisoning the once distilled. A young man no longer hunts deer but holds the same merit while rolling packs of Camels in his trousers. The Indian reveres himself as a piece of the old traditions and yet learns to survive in the land society has made alien to him.

One hundred and twenty miles separate the packed-powder snowfields of Taos Ski Valley and Santa Fe, the nearest city within the New Mexican border. A handful of writers and prominent artists, such as Georgia O'Keefe, built their homes in this location; few, however, dare to follow in their footsteps. Shielded by the Kachina Peaks, at an altitude of 8,000 ft., a dozen courageous cattle ranchers have staked their claim. Excluding the multitudes of vacationers that inhabit Taos throughout the ski season, the only true natives of this place, for centuries to come, are the Indians. They, or their descendants, rather, run the local 7-11 and other small businesses. A small, Catholic parish, built of adobe, stands erect in the center of town. The structure appears often in O'Keefe's paintings. On Easter Sunday, Mexicans clamor about the gates prior to the service. Dressed in formal attire, they represent the other majority.

Ten miles down the road, at the southernmost tip of Outlaw Mountain, lay the Taos Pueblos. Unlike the Plains Indians, who tended to be nomadic, the Pueblos built permanent settlements. This, their ancestral village, is perhaps centuries old. A sign prohibiting the taking of photographs without a paid fee welcomes the visitor to the settlement. There is no electricity; the only source of water is a freshwater stream running through the vicinity of the village.

## *The Taos Pueblos*

Mud-brick ovens still furnish the people with heat and a means of cooking. They welcome tourism as a source of livelihood and stable economic trade. A few of the huts are opened to sell goods such as pottery, shipped in from acclaimed artists -- not made in the village. Upon our arrival, my family splits up and wanders about the center, which is lined on this occasion with three rows of cars. It hurts to see these swarms, these clots of people all huddling about the huts; some venture so far as to break through people's backyards and wander through kitchens. My eyes burn with an empathy that comes from witnessing the scene a thousand times, first in Southeast Asia and now in my own backyard; the battle is fought harder on your own turf. And then my eyes rest on his marvelous face.

The old man's eyes hold the truth, and in the truth there is a sort of endurance, as if he has seen the world flourish and die before him. His countenance reflects a thoughtfulness brought about by the village's stagnation. He is the standing survivor of a period that changed the livelihood of an entire people, that had thrived for centuries before touched by the hand of "civilization." Wrinkles are molded into his face, framing two protruding cherry-like cheeks. His skin is baked to a mahogany brown by the scorching desert sun of the valley. He sits, oddly enough, in a folding beach chair, but with a dignified aura about him. Children are drawn to him, and yet do not venture within a radius of four feet of the old man. My mother, Keeper of the 35mm on family excursions, takes the occasion to politely discourse with her chief, Living Artifact, before inquiring about taking his picture. She aims the lens three feet from his head and hangs over him like a vulture. I twinged at the sight. It seems to me that the old man is, at that moment, like an animal caged for exhibition at the city zoo. In reality, he is being caged in his own territory.



*Anne Kellogg*

I wander into the coolness of an adobe shop with my younger sister, Caroline. The floor is neatly swept and there are traditional log supports in the framework of the roof. Indian clay pottery lines shelves stacked against the far wall and turquoise jewelry hangs on a large piece of driftwood on a glass case. A tall, well-built man in his thirties, of Pueblo descent, mans the cash register. He was dressed in a Hanes T-shirt and a pair of discarded Levis. He cradles a toddler over his right shoulder, who tugs on the long, thin braid that falls carelessly past the nape of his neck. He smiles politely, but it is not a complacent smile. My sister inspects the jewelry, captivated by its splendor, and I make my way to the doorway. The buildings, some of them five stories high, seem imperishable. They seem one with the awe-inspiring landscape, the gorge and lone peaks that tower above. The wind blows the scent of traditional tarts being baked in a bee-hive oven. A woman dressed in bright blue drapery sits in an alleyway, shielding herself from the crowds. Two young men with shoulder-length hair stand gossiping on a corner, spectators to the actions of feeble-minded tourists.

We leave the village with fruit tarts, Caroline's silver bracelet, and a slightly different perspective. The presence of the Pueblos is overpowering, and their struggle grows in the minds of us all. Their close ties with the surroundings cannot be crushed; the laws governing nature are competing with the laws of the white man, and his presence proves undiminishing. My mind leaves in turmoil, whence it arrived at bay, sugared by the whistling of powder under my skis.

## Sport of Kings

by Sean F. Sullivan

Big, quick eyes drawn backward,  
(As if to verify the end). Mistrusting  
Eyes, intense as a classic bronze  
In battle. Magnificent controlled  
Ferocity; a race horse just  
Finished a course, being restrained.  
Leather reins to bind the featured head  
Paralleled by potrusive veins  
Coursing a massive, vital  
Neck, spilling over in squiggles  
Down the harder face. Iron bit  
In frothing mouth. A violent  
Headshake spattering sweat,  
Confirming the little jockey's dominance.

Power tempered in bouncy,  
Compressed steps – half sideways,  
(Reins employed) chin to chest,  
Dense musculature popping  
Under a lather-wet coat like  
Ballet dancers' thighs in Spandex.  
Nostrils flared in the cold  
Exhaling dragons' breath.  
Steam rising ethereally  
From the heavy body, wisps  
Gathering me up and off  
On some horrifying ride.

# Shame

by Charlotte Burgess

It is not shame,  
Even now  
As I stand  
in the supermarket  
And stare in wonder  
At the strange pattern of tiles,  
One white line  
Inside two red  
Crossed with one white,  
One red,  
One white.  
Long lines  
Running out  
Like roads with no trees  
From beneath my feet.

It is not shame,  
As I catch sight  
Of the hands that held your elbows,  
Rough and cracked.  
That traveled the length  
And breadth  
Of your body,  
To rest upon your face...  
With a touch  
Too light  
For your taste

It is not shame,  
As I sit in my car  
Looking at the sky,  
Wishing that  
I was smaller  
And knowing  
That my loss  
is only the rippling  
of steamy breath  
Across the frozen windshield.

## *Shame*

It is not shame,  
As the bile rises,  
A hot, tight ball.  
It burns out  
My voice  
And I can only  
Stand, and watch.  
White lines in red  
On bone,  
On blood,  
On bone,  
Running away  
From under me.







## A Guitar

Kinn-Ming Chan

Fingers plucking strings  
(chords and melodies piercing the air)  
Fingers bleed and the blood flows  
with the pain of a gently pulsing river  
Out of tune strings  
let their difference beat upon unused ears  
It belched a Pure C-major chord.  
"Play that song, you know... was it by Cat Stevens?"  
Drops of red fell, from the ends of undulating hands,  
with the steady dusk showers after the brittle summer noon  
The voice crooned "Oh, how can I  
tell you, that I luhuhuhuv you  
-Karina, why are you pulling at  
your arms as if an army of ants  
paraded upon your flesh?" Like velvet  
-bristling under the long calcium extentions of fingertips.  
burning meat like crisp Sunday brunch bacon--  
burning arms like unexpected spittle splaying onto surprised skin  
smooth velvet bristles replaced the vanilla ice cream arms

Karina wanted to play the guitar--she tore the skin from her  
flesh--  
but there was no tune, only the buzz of the mosquitoes  
which proceeded to infest her eyes.

Karina wanted to play the guitar, but only her eyes would buzz.

It drove her bats to hear them buzz. That terrific thundering;  
it made her lip curl.

Only when the fingertips, raw with plucking and strumming,  
picked up his guitar, was it silent.

# Screen

by Susan Antebi

Left and right divide lines on a spectrum. The people feel that they are well past the cave-drawing stage, but ask, "What is causing the rise and fall?" And they start with a colorless list:

## List of Empires in the game of mind association

- |                  |              |
|------------------|--------------|
| 1. Rome ruins    |              |
| 2. Hapsburg      | sausages     |
| 3. Spain         | bullfights   |
| 4. Great Britain | Monty Python |
| 5. United States | Soybean farm |

Note: The focus is western, to avoid the hypocrisy of trying to be all-inclusive, which would inevitably mean leaving someone out.

At least one item on the list seems illogical. But considering a two-force theory, such details are unimportant, provided we can see the overall trend. They can go any way they want.

You are watching television, and someone says, "protein."

It's a cow girl. But you could even eat the telveision, with ketchup and mustard, if it was broken down properly.

When I am part of something, I fail to distinguish triviality from underlying theme. When I am separate, I have lost the image, too far away, and must rely on phrases. And the quest for non-cow protein takes on an all-important nature. I write the lines.

You draw the book.

If this followed convention, this section would be a mere footnote, but I chose to let it remain large and high on the page, so that those who begin to say, "How

## *Screen*

Irrele..." will say, "Why is it?"

This is this: You take to the screen that of me I want to be.

(You take my eyes but someone else's legs, and make me want them from TV.)

You make me need what you took to the face that I see.

(I mean, you sell it all back on the screen.)

You, with your paint.

I want my eyes black.

And then you have everything. In writing, for example, you say I write only eyes/lips poetry. You have not been reading. For eyes and lips were all you'd ever give me.

But we will leave this unpleasant recollection now.

After all, we are focusing on the west, one-sided. Same idea here. Look at the screen now.

The walls fade to a geometric gray. And the first color to pour inside is a slate blue, which becomes unobtrusively brilliant, by degrees. The people inside the cave are doing art with whatever comes in. The blue is made out of light, or sand, but eventually footprints, so that feet spread it everywhere. The first thing they do is make a solid line across the middle of the wall. The first thing they do is make small, embarrassed curves in the corners of the wall. Someone makes a vast sweep with her hand, taking in all the blue sand, streaking, spraying, limitless. The people look, silent, both amused and horrified at these marks which are obviously unerasable. And they laugh, at first uncertainly, then knowing that there is nothing to do but paint their own faces blue.

I'm watching. On my face are the initial curling lines, but I always put too much, and have to wash it off and start over. I'm sick of only blue, and even

when it fades back to slate-gray at night, I feel deficient, as if I've been eating only raw sliced cucumbers.

They remembered that other colors besides blue existed, but only from a distance, to prove the existence of blue itself, by contrast. but they forgot about using acrylic paint, and occasionally watercolors, instead of just oil. And they remembered to change the direction of their lines, but forgot that the surface itself is not always flat.

I am seeing a field. If you fly over the United States, you'll notice that some fields are divided into circles, instead of rectangles. That's exactly how the soybean farm goes, covering everything. And in the wedges where the circles' edges meet, that's where we put the blue sand foot prints, with the red-brown yellow green rainbow shades, and even the flavorless gelatin color from the back of the refrigerator where everyone else had forgotten it. And when they open all the shuttered houses, everyone goes running out, down the lines that open from the edges of the sea, pouring out as fishes when the tank falls through. They open every door, and no one is ashamed. It's only shapes and colors. The lines should not be replaced. The colors should not be dulled off a greying screen. Now we've found out soybeans, and we don't have to watch the smiling girl say, "protein," anymore. But now we have to slash the screen. Actually I've said what I like. Most people don't know my eyes/lips, and because I don't know theirs, we just look at all the lines and correspond by mail. You can still visit the European powers, and attend tourist attractions.

I have always liked the colors on their faces, and the shapes in the walls, and only wanted to see the flat surface begin to shatter, where I was projected on it.

# Childhood

by Susan Antebi

Margin running scream of blankness  
Like going to the Y for chlorine.  
Women all skirted in the same turquoise.  
Flank flesh ripple that diffused the light,  
Below the surface.  
But we're all above, screeching ones, hand-held,  
Safe because you can see the concrete, running all around.  
Until the things are brought out.

A hoop for the water, the first of many.  
Women grin, loud jokes and steaming pool room lights.  
They force me down by the head, cold and I didn't  
know before what it was like not to breathe.

Nothing. This time plunging without eyes.  
I will never come up again.  
Plucked out, like nothing.  
Forced through. Shrieks.  
"You can swim!"

But we have places where water runs brown with sand and mud.  
And you can eat it, because I say it is food.  
Earthworms like to live together  
Tightly pressed into an old margarine container.  
Add three slugs and stir.  
Beds made from crunchy leaves,  
Goblins live in trees.

I write everything, because I am the writer.  
The long-haired one and I  
Always poor and virtuous  
Besieged by witches.  
We have names like Holly and Elizabeth  
To build the goblin hamburger factory  
To run through the trees with.



*Susan Antebi*

There are places you can go in the house  
where you hide things and leave messages.  
You are not allowed to step on the rugs.  
We set a trap for my big brother  
by tying some string between doorways.  
It didn't work, though;  
he ducked under it.  
I never really went to sleep,  
but just lay in bed for a long time  
until I forgot I was lying there.  
Who needs sleep?  
So many times they didn't know I heard everything,  
awake at night,  
or all twisted up in the curtains.



## A Letter to Canada

by Susan Antebi

I think I should go to Toronto. Go and meet that guy I wrote a poem for. I have to wonder why I'd write for a stranger. That makes it worth a trip.

We're sitting on the beach and I'm trying to write this poem.

"Pages of Nothing

I'm just Bluffing

This is shit

I know it"

Nothing. Sand between your toes. This is a day so hot you wish it was freezing and then suddenly when it gets cold you can't believe it, cold like you said you wanted. We rode bikes just for the breeze they bring.

And Janis and I, we take off our shoes, even though the dune grass bites your feet when you least expect it. Janis's hair is so blonde it's almost frightening. Even without sunlight, she is an electronic Sandra Dee. But her English is halting. The guy she likes sits alone with his long hair, on a towel, so he sees me come out of the water. I'm the only one who doesn't think the water is too cold for swimming; I even go out far, and get loose to see where I wash up.

I guess I wrote the poem for Janis, because why would I write it for a stranger in Canada? On my way to being washed up, I start thinking about all the time I've spent on dry land, and how this is such a short time to be in the water, a short time to float in another medium. I'm not tired. I think I could almost just swim away. Below the surface, it sounds like screaming, because there's so much space. I realize how I'm counting on the land over there. I have to start swimming because I'm drifting away, not toward the beach, away from Janis and the long-haired guy and all the sand. So I get frantic in my strokes, especially when something bites my toe (I think).

## *A Letter to Canada*

Of course I try to look like a magazine cover walking up the beach, but my nose has turned a little too red. That's how I'll always look at the beach, kind of afflicted. Janis laughs when I walk up; we're both getting fried. There's a hot dog stand behind us, and I realize this beach is filled with people eating, chewing, swallowing, rolling over on blankets to fully roast themselves. They choose to roast.

The poem I write is about two wild birds, and waiting for a wave. Janis says something about crayon-blue sea, so I put that in too, whatever.

We always need more water, even if it's just to get to land. Like taking a shower when you've been wet all day. Like sweeping the floor of people who hate you. I would rather never change clothes at all, instead of freshening up for other people.

The sun has moved to cook my other leg. People leave, carrying wet shoes to their cars. My hip bones stick out like new weapons, since I walk around in a bathing suit. I'm glad my poem is going to Canada. I want to follow it, want to see it in the face of the stranger, the change on his face. Will he know that Janis could not have written it? She's sealing up the letter, crayon blue sea. I make a drumbeat on my hipbones, waiting for a wave. So even in Canada, you remember, in black lines, these.

## Mum

by Susan Antebi

You sit crossed-legged on a stone wall.  
Ground up rock indents the backwards palms of hands in  
pellet shapes.  
Low, like at a Japanese restaurant.  
You can't have any tea because the china is outdoors,  
But you can pluck wild flowers with nothing but greed for  
color.  
Or think about earth ridged into someone's corduroys.

You just wear a dress that has flowers on it,  
To stand by the gatepost,  
Like photography with long hair in the way.  
But you never look at the pictures,  
Only at foreground hills  
and clipped, segregated gardens.

Not unusually, the town is quite nearby.  
Bus, motorcar, basket.  
Your parents went with you to the parties,  
So you learned to be discreet.  
Small glasses and gentle acquaintances.

Home in scubbed rooms  
glassed view of rain.  
You worry about cold weather and plan the escape.  
Somehow you got it so  
I have it but  
There's no American shock  
or surprise at the "bigger, better,"  
the easy care fabric.  
Not a both, a nothing.  
You say you miss the countryside.





## Untitled

by Daphne Matalene

Last weekend, my parents sent me off to do something so illegal I would have been thrown out of school had I been caught. We went to Cambridge to meet Becky and Kevin Lewis, who were visiting their daughter Helen, a sophomore at Harvard. We had dinner together in Adams House, the artsy/spacey/just plain weird house.

Helen is every bit as smart as everyone else at Harvard, but talking to her gives one the impression that she is twenty times dumber. She has a very high voice, and speaks in a strange mix of southern accent and British speech patterns about nothing in particular. She is a hippie in the true sense of the word -- there are no longer styrofoam cups in the Freshman Union because Helen found out they were environmentally unsound. Not only does she buy her clothes in thrift stores and at street fairs, she buys them by the pound. Her four-pound winter coat cost four dollars.

After dinner, our parents went for a walk through Harvard Yard. Helen, her roommate Keiko and I went back to Claverly to get raincoats before going to an Adams House cocktail party. In the room, we met Linda, a ravishing redhead from New York. Linda's boyfriend was taking her to a party somewhere, and he had told her to "dress sexy." She was wearing a short black skirt and a jacket with nothing under it. Helen announced that I was a friend from home, and if I'd been smart, I'd have let it go at that. But I forged ahead and told them I was a sophomore at Andover, and started Linda and Keiko off on a lengthy discourse about how kids who come from prep schools hang around together and are generally snobby.

"They all live in the same dorms, they all go to the same parties, and take the same classes and wear the same clothes, and they're just generally

## *Untitled*

snobs. They can't stand the thought of not being just like all their friends," said Linda. "There aren't any prep school kids in this house -- we'd freak them all out," added Keiko.

I had no clue how to respond, so I just nodded and said, "Hmnmhm."

Helen emerged from her room, so we left and headed over to the party. We climbed countless steps before reaching the room. The door was opened by a girl with red hair that went down to her waist. She was wearing a black velvet cocktail dress with rhinestone straps. Zephyrs of weed drifted out into the hallway as we went in. I think there were about thirty people there, but I am not sure how many were women and how many were men. Everyone had longish dirty hair, everyone wore thick black eyeliner, everyone drank beer and smoked cigarettes with the same hand. The only difference was that the men wore baggy black clothes and the women wore tight black clothes. The B-52's were playing in the background. Keiko handed me a beer, which I sipped nervously. The girls living in the room had decorated it with things they had made themselves. Above the mantle was a painting of the five of them. Each one had painted herself, and they had glued the finished products to a big canvas. On the wall behind the sofa was a relief of a colonial drummer -- he had a blue face and pink hair. I talked with the hostess for a while -- I forgot her name, but I think it was some gibberish like Malarkey. She had bright pink hair and big eyes outlined with a thick black pencil. She was incredibly trashed and laughed at the end of every sentence. "You're a friend of Helen's? HA HA Do you like the painting? HA HA We did it ourselves. HA HA HA HA!"

I was hardly comfortable among these people. First I thought it was because I was so much younger than everyone else, but then I looked at the other

*Daphne Matalene*

people in the room and discovered that it was because of the way I was dressed. Everyone was wearing a tight, short, black cocktail dress. I was wearing a big pink cashmere sweater, a turtleneck, a navy blue paisley skirt, and sensible brown boots. Worst of all, I was wearing the add-a-pearl necklace that my grandmother gave me! Afterwards, I figured out why I choose to look so waspy. It's actually a joke -- I am hardly preppie in the way I think. I go for the LL Bean ready-to-wear line because it says absolutely nothing about me. I used to "express myself" through my clothing, but eventually I ran out of things to say. I'd rather spend my time *being* weird than trying to look weird.



## After Shakespeare at 1:43 A.M.

by Margaret Litvin

With lines of Hamlet coursing through my head  
(They fly and smash against the walls of prose)  
I trudge off slowly toward my waiting bed,  
To get some rest, or, if you wish, "repose."  
2b or not 2b, or 2b<sup>2</sup>?  
The problem, Life, will haunt me 'til I die.  
I've asked before and no one really cared:  
Just what is this imaginary *i* ?  
It walks and talks and sleeps and eats and drinks,  
And tries to make some sense of life around;  
It writes because it thinks,  
By work and study it feels trapped and bound.  
2b or not 2b, who gives a damn?  
I study for my tests, therefore I am.





## Running Water

by Sonya Chung

She had the shower running again. Sixteen thousand dollars in hospital bills and counseling sessions, and that darn shower was still running. What I couldn't understand was why she even bothered with the shower. I mean, who did she think she was fooling? Was she being so kind as to spare us the sickening sonance of vomiting? Since when was our welfare of any concern to her?

Vomiting, I always felt, was terribly exhausting, not to mention thoroughly unpleasant. Yet my 20 year-old, forever-adolescent sister had decided that it was worth it as long as she could reduce herself to a mere rake (whether she truly cared about the appearance of her body, I'll never know). We used to think she was just an eccentric in her eating habits, the way she picked at her own food and everyone else's. She was fairly open about her binging -- without drawing attention, but without hiding it, either. She would consume entire boxes of crackers, full cans of peanuts, half gallons of ice cream. She never used plates or bowls or utensils; and there were always two bites of mutilated coffee cake or fingered salad left in a kitchen vicinity of about three rooms for anyone to notice. She had mastered a certain subtle openness in her habits. I watched her and I was subtle as well. I watched her go from the television to the refrigerator, up to the freezer, then over to the pantry, back to the television. Over and over she would do this, and I watched. We seemed not to notice each other, but she captured my genuine curiosity. I thought about how she had always been named the prettiest of us all (and she was). I found it odd that food did not "taste good" or "satisfy her hunger"; it simply filled her to the point where she could give it all back. It was almost a ceremonial offering to a new Spirit of existence she had found. And that's when she would turn the shower on. I suppose the running water completed her ritual cleansing,

## *Running Water*

purifying her outside as well as her inside. I also suppose it drowned out the horrible choking sounds that accompanied each session, at least in *her* ears.

Conclusions such as these blossomed from my newfound profession as Mother's therapist. I could not escape being drawn into tiresome conversations regarding my sister's "destructive conditions". A perfectly lovely mother-daughter lunch ranging from the "psychological effects of day care at a young age" to "the burden of the oldest child" to "the image of the attractive woman in the media today", followed by a habitual shedding of guilty tears. I rarely contributed to these half-conversations. The truth was, I barely knew my sister. We had always kept our distance. She was too hostile for me, and too simple for her. "You're too alike," my mother would say. I don't think I believed her.

Mother blamed herself wholly. Only a painful upbringing could have triggered such a thing, and only an unfit mother could have let her child suffer so. From where I stood, my sister had gotten everything she had ever wanted and would be best served if she was left to fend for herself for a change. I tried telling that to mother once, but she wouldn't listen. She never listened. Not to me, anyway, and not when it came to my sister. "Faulty maternal instinct" was the bottom line, and I quickly learned to refrain from sharing what I knew was true.

I suppose Mother found me the least threatening -- the baby, the one who didn't know enough to disagree or even respond. That's why she always cried in front of me, overwhelmed me with the guilt she had fabricated within herself. In essence, it wasn't her fault. None of it was. I knew it, and I think she knew it, too. But she had to find some way to channel her pain, and guilt was as good an emotion as any.

*Sonya Chung*

I grew used to that shower running. Until one day, I woke up to silence. As I groped down the stairs, I heard heavy footsteps coming up from the basement. The familiar clamor of keys materialized into my mother's sleepless face. "Well, it's done. What else could I do? She gave me no choice. I had no other choice," she said so rationally that she had herself fooled. I didn't even have to ask. "She's in Youth Psychology at Surburban General. That's it. Six to nine months. That should make you happy." That wasn't fair.

I went upstairs to take a shower, I bent over the bathtub, resting one hand on the wall of the cold porcelain tub. Slowly, I pulled on the resting plastic knob, twisting it towards the red "H" on the left. The water was cold so I let it run for extra long. I stared at myself in the mirror, uglier than *she* had ever been. I lay my hand under the heavy stream of lukewarm water, wishing it were more convincing.



# In Search of the Sun

by Julia Cumes

Happy Valley, Utah; the blue blackness of the chalkboard stares at me and the empty chairs around me are like the sagging frames of tired beggars. I feel the coldness of my seat seep into my buttocks and travel through my body to the tips of my blue nails. I fold my hands together and bring my knees up close to my body. I think of a sun, large and red, burning down on the people. I am still cold and I look down at my skin, white as cotton swabs. I think of Camille, Camille in her black skirt, blonde hair floating above her head like cotton candy propped up by an invisible rod. Camille with her poodle resisting at the end of its velvet lead and her lips, small and sharp, sucking on a lipsticked Virginia Slim.

I see the chalkboard again. I wonder how many tiny hands have scribbled "I will not talk in class" or "I will not be late" on that smooth blackness. Tiny blue hands fighting to keep the cold grip from freezing them in mid task. hear the high screech of dry chalk on slate, the piqued faces of babies in pain, the V-shaped eyebrows, thick and hairy, of the schoolmaster. Camille, fascinated ten year old, reading "A Guide to Mysticism" and "Language of the Spirits," legs tucked under her ten year old body. They said she was a witch, squatting in the corner, a tiny crystal clasped in her pink hands. Mothers held their children tightly to their large breasts when Camille passed them on the sidewalks. She didn't even look at them, just kept her eyes on a distant object, shunning their stares. Spoke to no one. No one to speak to. Alone in the quad, too pained to look at the girls skipping in their pink-checkered dresses. They said she was a witch. Happy Valley, hell hole of Utah, celebrated her title.

When she could bear it no longer, the cold stares, blasphemous words scribbled in red paint on her mother's picket fenced house, she disappeared.



## *In Search of the Sun*

Inside herself, warm and dark as night. Played out her namesake, dressed in black and stared right back at the mothers. Cold piercing eyes screamed of her witchdom. A group of children, "Satanists" their claim to society, picked her up, fed on her desperation. They took her into the woods and she watched them as they tore out a cat's heart. She laughed as the dark blood colored a rotting log, red seeping into a carpet of green moss. Laughed with white teeth shining like pearls into the darkness, cried inside.

They sent her away. White walls, buttoned uniforms and floors that smelled of antiseptic. "Military School for the Advancement of Juveniles" tattooed in black onto the gray of their brains. She read. They took away her books and told her to mingle. The fat girl who shared her room told her she'd watched her brother die. She said that God died the day she buried her brother's straw hat. A picture of him, a large black gap in his white smile, hung above her bed, the only picture in the whole room.

The day she got out she took a bus to the coast. She sat on her cold gray seat and watched the wind blow time through the trees. A woman who sat beside her touched the hair on her arm like a child poking for life in a dead chicken. She was waiting for a sun, red and fiery and alive. She had been waiting for fifteen years and when she got off the bus and came to the water's edge, she didn't wait to feel for the cold. She ran in with her dress flailing out behind her, laughing the laugh of a wild woman. She bathed herself in water, clean and clear and had an old man pour it over her from a rusted bucket. The water wasn't as clean because tiny flakes of rust swam in it like baby gold fish but she knew it was as good and clean as a Happy Valley witch could hope for. When the sun was turning pale pink, she stood waist high in the water and peeled off her clothes. The waves breathed around her and her dress drifted

*Julia Cumes*

away with the whitewash. She thought of it as dead caterpillar skin after a beautiful butterfly had discarded it.

She took a job as a maid, living in a four by four foot room with an old sofa for a bed. She could smell urine on its worn cushions but it was urine from the generation before and was as much a part of the sofa as its green corduroy surface. The children she cared for had seen as much pain as she had happiness and she patted their pink bottoms with talcum powder that smelled rich and clean. She cooked potatoes, scrubbed pawprints off plush carpets and scraped bird shit off the windcreens of fancy cars. One day she got up and left, into the darkness of the night. The happy children screamed and cried until the snot and tears clogged their passages and they stopped. No one wiped their noses. Tony Martinelli picked her up one day, called her his stray cat. She clung to him like a child on a swing that goes too high. He put her to work making jewelry and she crafted tiny dragon claws and snake pins. She smoked all the time and he told her she smelled like an old woman so she tried to quit. He fed her gourmet dishes that he'd learned how to make when he was young and put her in his bed. Afterwards he held her in his arms and rocked her like she'd always wanted to be rocked... She was a princess. She painted her face and colored her hair so it was golden like a princess's should be. She wanted a little dog and he brought one home, a tiny white cloud on the end of a velvet lead. She wore red stilettos and walked down Poppy Street in them, dragging the cloud puff along behind her. She said she was as happy as any Happy Valley witch could be. I sit in the classroom whose corner once housed her squatting form. My wooden desk top has been scratched and hacked to splinters and I see words tattooed blood red into it. Red like the color of the sun she was searching. The Poppy Street Princess has her name, etched with a tool sharper than time, preserving her memory, cold and sacred, in the pulp of the Happy Valley wood.



## The White Cotton Dress

by Julia Cumes

Ngema lay stretched out on his back. His fingers played with the soft tips of green grass and a small crease, a smile, was fixed in the blackness of his skin. Church bells rang out like the cries of children around an ice-cream van and Ngema felt the dancing flickers of sunlight that penetrated the shade of the Jackaranda tree and patterned his face. He remembered the shower he had taken early that morning, the soap, his hands scrubbing frantically to rid his body of the stench of garbage. Ngema Nkosi: Hillbrow garbage man. His status was now a putrefying stench in a Hillbrow drainpipe and the sweet smell of Jackaranda blossoms filled his nostrils.

Ngema turned over so that the park grass tickled the smoothness of his bare stomach. He watched the people in the park and hummed a tune, a tune his mother had sung to him as a child. On the other side of the park sat a white family on a red spotted blanket. The woman, small and frail, reminded him of his own wife who lived far away in the rural Northern Transvaal. He remembered the last time he had seen her; Christmas time almost a year before when Ngema had come home on his annual two week vacation. His wife, thin and in the last stages of pregnancy, had baked him a delicious banana loaf and they had eaten it while they told each other stories of their separate lives and he swore it was the most delicious loaf he had ever eaten. When it was time for his departure, she had stood in the entrance of the hut, an elf in the large void of the doorway and waved to him, her hand, limp as dead fish, like a flag of painful resignation. He remembered her belly, large and strange beneath the white cotton dress that hung ghost-like around her disfigured form. The child must be almost ten months old now and he wondered what it looked like.

The white family had a portable radio and the father bounced his

## *The White Cotton Dress*

small child in time to the rhythmic beat of the tune that blared from its speaker. The child laughed loudly, throwing its head back and pulling at the rich black hair on its father's belly. Ngema stared in fascination and could not tear his eyes away from the father and child. His throat felt strange and he heard a cry, a cry terrible and animal-like. Suddenly conscious that it was he that had screamed, he looked around to see if anyone had heard him. His strong black hands shook and he hid them under his chest.

Images of his wife flashed before him and, unable to control his body, he was up, running, staggering towards the white family. The spotted blanket grew larger, the red circles pulsating like a neon advertisement in a bad neighborhood. "Voetsak man. Wat doen jy, bloody Kaffir boy?" The words hit him like black bullets and he shrank back, cowering stupidly like a beaten dog. The family surrounded the child like a shroud around a body. The barrier lay thick and white and the black dog stood alone, shunned in his inescapable pain.

It was five AM and Ngema's muscles were hard and tight under the weight of the rubbish barrel. The taste of the strong black coffee hung thickly on his tongue and his stomach felt like knotted sinew. He felt the scrutiny of his foreman as his arms struggled with the weights and he stood, filthy and panting. The large barrel tumbled violently from his arms and bounced onto the concrete, its innards scattering wildly around him. A dead dog; rotten eggs; a cupie doll, battered and missing a leg; a bunch of wilted daisies; all lay decorating the sidewalk with their festive colors. Among the collection of putrefying items was something soft and white. Ngema scratched around frantically and uncovered a woman's white cotton dress. He stared at the object and then slowly picked it up and held it closely to his trembling body.





## Room 419

by Julia Cumes

Old lady, dried lava skin, green chair,  
lips, bluish and shrunken  
mouth the words of a song  
no one remembers.  
Veins crawl up her arms,  
little dye-injected worms creeping under a flowered sleeve.  
"Catherine, Catherine," she calls,  
tells me it is her sister, she is waiting.  
Monster chair, those wheels that click,  
tick, tick, on the gray and black tiles,  
joyrides down the hallways,  
antiseptic stings the air, up and down,  
up and down, gray, black, gray, black.  
Back to the room, white, hellish.  
Picture on the shelf, woman and man,  
Hands welded together,  
lips, dark and wet, smiling.  
Below the sheets, amorphous mound, shrunken.  
Fingers, twisted roots, reach out, hungry for skin.  
Alone, too much time  
to watch clock hands chase each other.  
A nurse, large and white,  
sighs in the darkness.  
Tiny pills, round and smooth as frozen dew,  
slip into her mouth.  
Feel them slither, cold and slick,  
down, down, into emptiness.



# Solitaire

by Rebecca Howland

A huge line, like the veins on Bertha's hands, ran down the center of the table. The crack had been glued years before and the residue left marks like thin, red wires impressed on my thigh. I shifted position, sighing as the chilled marble struck a section of my exposed leg. The room was a stuffy one with flowered chintz and Persian rugs in garish detail. As I sat Indian style on the table, my eyes wandered from the cards in front of me and became swallowed up into the dizzying depths of color and pattern.

"Becky dear, now you put the two of hearts on top of the ace...." Bertha's voice, sweet with the whispers of never forgotten youth, puffed out like the fragrant powder I liked to play with in her bathroom. Looking at her, I could nearly see the white billowing out with every word. "Now the Queen of Spades goes on the Jack...."

No sharp corners were allowed to Great Aunt Bertha; even she was padded and round like the magnificent pillows I'd bury myself under on her bed. I used to winnow myself into the hollow of her lap and imperiously demand: "Teach me a game Aunt Birthday!" That day it was the rudiments of solitaire. Her ringed fingers would brush mine as she shuffled the cards around on the table. As I perched there, my vision would swim in the kaleidoscope surrounding me and my mind would stray from the lesson in front of me. I don't remember finishing the game. With the impatience of youth I must have wandered off, entranced by the knickknacks spread haphazardly over every surface, or the great expanse of lawn outside the window.

Three years ago they put her in a mental institution; she was "unable to take care of herself" anymore. The thought of her in a setting like that frightened me. I could imagine her soft skin bruising with every brush against the cold, hard corners of an institution, her breathy voice lost in the endless corridors. She must have faded quickly, for less than a year later she died. There is no plot in the ground or plaque on a wall to commemorate Bertha, but like her ashes in the wind memories linger on, held in captivity by every game of solitaire ever played.





## Bitter Coffee and Sweet Tea

by Lisa Levy

An old Ford truck. It's parked  
next to the cloth-walled, wall-blanketed  
tent that breathes of pure  
strong- ground coffee, the kind that leaves  
a sticky crust at the bottom  
of chipped stenciled glasses.  
They're crusted with dust  
Desert dust; dirty but  
I cannot refuse.  
Unwashed fruit and flat-baked bread  
then I listen as the eldest son  
Sings circles, string patterns,  
curling fingers stroking the pear-shaped belly,  
Heavy with ornate decor of near-lascivious roses  
and intricate eastern scroll  
Painted, carved into the vital wood,  
and the songs that he plays, as I sit  
on the rug-floor, at cool thin night  
The coffee simmers and bubbles in its small copper  
Vessel that sits upon embers that glow heat  
in the black desertness; the music is taking me  
into the heart of glow, between the  
fire-tinged coals.  
The coffee I drink is so  
thick and black bitter,  
my blood rushes dizzy  
now I have lost  
the order of words.  
I think I start swaying. Every song ends  
Abruptly but then a new one begins and  
the last one forgotten, the night shadow song --  
The girls enter, timid. There is one,  
they whisper,  
She has learned English in school  
and when she enters the tent shyly I see  
that she carries a baby with little gold  
Earrings. Later I find out  
She has been married two years.

(continued...)

*Lisa Levy*

I am thinking too clearly. It's time  
for more coffee, more bitter night  
to swallow whole, let the stars  
Bubble out of my mouth in a huge  
Rush of fireflies, from where  
the sound flows fast;  
I shut my mouth to hold them in  
They pour from my nostrils  
Now I am full of stars  
Now they are gone.  
Bitter coffee drunken, the ritual  
Is only half over.  
Bessma and baby have left in the  
Presence of men.  
They tell me that they have an  
Enemy. He slew one of  
Their family with his scimitar  
The price of an insult, and then  
He fled. If ever they see him  
They will kill him, but vengeance  
Pales at the stronger of forces,  
the flap of the tent;  
for hospitality is no light matter  
in a wandering culture; once invited  
You must never refuse.  
If the long-sought Enemy asks  
Hospitality of those  
from whom he flees  
The tent is a haven. He is, no less, a guest  
served bitter coffee  
and finally sweet tea.  
The ritual complete, the Enemy may leave  
and once he steps out of the tent  
they will stab him.

(continued...)

*Bitter Coffee Sweet Tea*

A Bedouin tent, a white Ford truck  
The ceremony ends with a cup of singular tea  
A forest of mint leaves strangle the surface  
as thickly sweet as the coffee had been  
Bitter. Night of coffee and copper  
and embers and daggers, the air  
stroking singing and  
Bessma and I knew from  
Each other's eyes  
that we were both teenagers  
I could have been her or she I  
Sohair, the sister kisses both of my cheeks and I  
thank them elaborately  
and the sugar still heavy upon my  
Weary tongue, I see the  
Enemy crouch in shadows  
waiting for refuge  
for coffee and tea  
The stars back in their places.  
This is the desert  
And as we drive away  
in the white Ford we leave  
a trail of dust to coat the chipped glasses  
That await the next guest.

## Self-Portrait as Maya Angelou

by Lisa Levy

We need to wear the mask, she said  
and G-d I know it's true  
My skin is white and bears no scars  
but whispers, *angelou*

oh, maya, how you spit your grin, how --  
Cracking like the whip  
Mask, silent as your fury, yet  
the tears unfurl your lip,  
Revealing rows of teeth that must  
have bit on words like stones,  
Cracking open thirsty seeds  
that left your tongue with poem.  
You leave me with the hope that screams  
and lashes in its why,  
When I see it snap and break  
In five white boys. I tried,

I read their blindness, felt it sink  
Dripping laughter thick with ink --  
Maya, I was Black inside;  
I stung and I curled up inside;  
Maya Angelou, .  
I cried.











